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TITLE WHIRLING LOGS AND COLORED SAND

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NOTES

1. Washington Matthews, "Mythic Dry-Paintings of the Navajos," *American Naturalist* 19 (1885):931-39.
2. Ted Brasser, "North American Indian Art for TM," in *The Religious Character of Native American Humanities*, ed. Sam Gill (Tempe: Department of Religious Studies, Arizona State University, 1977), pp. 126-43.
3. Don C. Talayesva, *Sun Chief: An Autobiography of a Hopi Indian*, ed. Leo W. Simmons (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1942), p. 184.
4. Emory Sekaquaptewa, "Hopi Ceremonies," in *Seeing with a Native Eye*, ed. Walter H. Capps (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), p. 39.
5. Amiri Baraku [LeRoi Jones], "Hunting Is Not Those Heads on the Wall," in *Home: Social Essays* (New York: Morrow, 1972), pp. 173-78.
6. Robert Thompson, in *African Art in Motion* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974), and others have shown how true this is for African art.
7. Edmund Carpenter, *Eskimo Realities* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1973), p. 202. Another sensitive book introduced by Carpenter is Bill Holm and Bill Reid, *Indian Art of the Northwest Coast: A Dialogue on Craftsmanship and Aesthetics* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1975).
8. The phrase "It's where you put your eyes," was taken from a Sesame Street song.

Whirling Logs and Colored Sands

This chapter will focus on a single Navajo sand painting done in an actual ceremonial performance—the Whirling Logs sand painting of the Nightway ceremonial.¹ I will view several dimensions of the sand painting rite, considering its construction, the rite performed upon it, elements in the greater ceremonial context, and the associated stories. I am seeking to understand sand painting as much as possible from the perspective of Navajos and to illustrate aspects of Navajo religious thought.

In preparation for the construction of the Whirling Logs sand painting the center of the ceremonial hogan is cleared and the fire is moved to the side. A layer of clean sand is spread upon the floor and smoothed out with weaving battens. The sand painters make a guide for long straight lines by snapping a taut string to make an indentation in the sand base. The sand painting is constructed from the center outward under the direction of the singer, who does not usually participate in the sand painting. For the Whirling Logs sand painting, first the black cross which represents the whirling logs is constructed upon the center, which may be formed by burying a shallow bowl of water so that its surface is even with that of the painting. The center represents the lake upon which the logs float. The logs are outlined in red and white. The crushed colored materials used in making the sand painting are held in bark containers.

As the last arm of the cross is being completed, the roots of the corn plants which appear in each of the four quadrants are drawn, with their beginning in the central representation of the lake. Navajos have said that this is so because the corn needs water in order to live. The corn plants constructed in each quadrant are of

four colors—white, yellow, blue, and black. Each is outlined in a contrasting color. Two ears of corn are shown on each stalk.

On each of the four arms of the whirling logs sit two *yé'ii*, or masked holy people. The outer figures are male and wear helmetlike masks with two eagle plumes and a tuft of owl feathers. They carry gourd rattles and spruce branches. The inner figures are female carrying spruce branches in both hands.

When the inner portion of the sand painting is complete, *yé'ii* figures are drawn adjacent to the ends of each of the arms of the cross. To the west is *hashch'é ooghwaan*, or Calling God, who is dressed in black and wears a blue mask ornamented with eagle and owl feathers. He carries in his hands a black wand decorated with representations of feathers of turkeys and eagles. The skins of blue birds are depicted as being attached to the wand. The figure on the east side is *hasch'étti'i*, or Talking God. He is dressed in white and wears a white mask decorated with eagle feathers tipped with breath feathers and a tuft of yellow owl feathers, with a fox skin under the left ear. He carries a gray squirrel-skin pouch on a string. His eye and mouth markings are distinctive, but the sand-painting representation does not include the corn symbol on the face, as does the mask of the impersonator.

The *yé'ii* to the north and south are *ghwáá'ask'idii*, or Humpbacks. They wear blue masks with a zigzag line of white lightning around them and red feathers representing sunbeams radiating out from the masks. The masks are topped with blue horns which identify them with mountain sheep. The hump on the back is a representation of a sack laden with goods. These *yé'ii* carry black staffs. The anthropomorphic rainbow guardian figure circumscribes the painting on all sides but the east. Plumed wands, which represent holy people, are erected around the periphery of the sand painting.

In the hands of the rainbow guardian are placed cups of herbal infusion, which will be used in the sand-painting rite. A cedar twig is laid upon the shell cup with which to administer the medicine. This completes the construction of the sand painting.

The Nightway ceremonial during which this sand painting is made is performed according to a Holyway-type ritual process. This indicates that it is performed for a person suffering a predicament

whose cause is attributed to one of the *diyin dine'é*, or holy people of the Navajo. The ritual process is bent on reestablishment of proper relationships between the one over whom the ceremonial is being sung—the one-sung-over—and certain of the holy people. The expected results of these renewed relationships are that the malevolence will be withdrawn and the person may then be rightly remade or re-created. The sand-painting rites take place on the fifth through the eighth days of a nine-night ceremonial. It should be noted that Nightway is one of the ceremonials in which the holy people make their appearance by means of masked impersonators.

When the rites on the sand painting are about to begin, the one-sung-over enters the ceremonial hogan, and the singer or medicine person begins the whirling logs songs. The one-sung-over, carrying a basket of cornmeal, stands to the east of the painting and sprinkles cornmeal upon it. This gesture of blessing is repeated on the south, west, and north. Then meal is scattered all around the periphery. While the one-sung-over prepares to enter the sand painting, a *yé'ii* enters the hogan whooping and proceeds to sprinkle the picture with the herb medicine using the cedar twig. The application of medicine is done systematically and carefully. The one-sung-over enters the sand painting and sits down. The *yé'ii* approaches him or her with the shell cup of medicine from which he or she drinks. Some of the medicine is put on the hands of the *yé'ii*, and with this moisture he picks up sands from the feet, legs, body, and head of each of the figures in the sand painting, including the cornstalks, and applies them to the corresponding body parts of the one-sung-over. After each application, the *yé'ii* lifts his hands toward the smoke hole. When the application is completed, the *yé'ii* yells twice into each ear of the one-sung-over and leaves the ceremonial hogan. The one-sung-over then leaves the sand painting. The plumed wands are removed, and what remains of the picture is carefully erased by the singer using a feathered wand. The sand painting materials are taken out of the hogan to be correctly disposed of. The Whirling Logs songs are sung until the *yé'ii* departs.

The stories of Nightway are too extensive and complex to recount in detail. The principal story is about four brothers and a brother-in-law who go on a hunting expedition. The next-to-youngest brother is the protagonist and he is a visionary. His name, *Bitahátini*, means

“his imagination” or “his visions.” The story begins with a conflict between the visionary and his brothers because they do not believe the authenticity of the vision experiences and refuse to listen to *Bitahátini*. The two eldest brothers and the brother-in-law leave for a hunting trip, and the visionary decides to follow them the next day. While camping by himself he overhears a conversation between two groups of crows in humanlike forms. He learns that his brothers have killed a crow, a magpie, and twelve deer. Since the crow and magpie are the owners of the deer, the crow people decree that the brothers will get no more game. The next day the visionary catches up with his brothers and tells them what he has heard. Only the brother-in-law listens to him. The elder brothers continue to hunt for several days, but the visionary’s prophecy proves correct; they get no more game. On the way home mountain sheep are spotted and the visionary is sent to kill them. As he attempts to do so, he finds that he is unable to release his arrows, and he shakes violently. He makes several attempts until finally the sheep reveal to him that they are really holy people. They are Fringe Mouths in disguise, and they give him the guise of a mountain sheep and take him into a canyon. The place to which he is taken is no ordinary canyon, and here the Fringe Mouths enact the archetypal performance of Nightway and teach *Bitahátini* its songs, prayers, and procedures. In an attempt to help recover their lost brother the elder brothers have left offerings of jewels and pollens in baskets at the cliff edge. These are used in the ceremonial performance.

During the performance the visionary is captured by *hasch’é ayóí*, or Superior God, and taken to his home in the sky. Talking God is dispatched on a journey to recover the visionary. The ceremonial continues.

Finally, after testing the visionary’s powers and his knowledge of Nightway songs and prayers, the holy people allow him to return to his home in order to teach what he has learned to the youngest of the four brothers. After the youngest brother becomes proficient in the ceremonial performances, *Bitahátini* disappears and it is believed that he has gone to live in the home of the holy people.

Washington Matthews, who studied the Nightway ceremonial for twenty years during the late nineteenth century, recorded a sequel to this story which he entitled “The Whirling Logs.” In many ways it is a

more complex and fascinating story than the other. The protagonist, once again, is *Bitahátini*, the visionary. Having seen the picture of the whirling logs when he learned the Nightway, he is driven upon a quest for the place of the whirling logs. The visionary prepares a hollow cottonwood log for travel down the San Juan River in search of this place. When he launches his vessel, it immediately sinks and *Bitahátini* fears he will lose his life. When they find that he is gone, his family seeks the help of holy people in finding him.

Upon rescuing him from the bottom of the river, the holy people ask what he was attempting to do. He reveals his desire to visit the place of the whirling logs and to learn of the mysteries there. His persistence overcomes the reluctance of the holy people to assist him. They prepare a hollow log with crystal windows and launch him down the river. Several holy people accompany his journey to keep him afloat in mid-stream and to assist him past obstacles. After a journey of many incidents the log enters a lake, and upon circling it four times lands on the south shore. The visionary is allowed to leave the log and enter the house of the Fringe Mouths of the Water, where he learns from them their sand painting. He reenters the log and it carries him around the lake four times again to land on the north shore, where another sand painting is revealed to him. Back in the log, he is carried out of the lake and along a stream leading to the whirling lake. Landing on the south shore, *Bitahátini* finally sees the whirling logs upon the lake. The story says, “He beheld the cross of sticks circling on the lake. It did not move on its own center, but turned around the center of the water. The log which lay from east to west was at the bottom; that which lay from north to south was on top. On each of the logs, four holy ones were seated—two at each end. . . . Many stalks of corn were fixed to the log.”² As he watches, the log cross lands on the west shore, and the holy people who were transported by it enter a house. The visionary proceeds along the shore toward the west and he too enters the house. The holy ones are prepared for him and already have placed the picture of the whirling logs upon the floor. They reveal to him the rites of the painting. The visionary is then given a ride around the lake on the cross of logs with the holy people.

Taking his leave the visionary starts back to the south shore, where he had left his log vehicle, but on the way he discovers an area

which would make a good farm. His pet turkey whom he had left behind appears there and produces seeds of four colors of corn and many other plants from various parts of its body. The turkey protects and comforts *Bitahátini*. The seeds are planted and grow to maturity in four days. Holy people appear to help with the harvest and to instruct the visionary on how to harvest, cook, and eat the foods he has grown. They build him a house and perform a harvest ceremony.

Left alone the visionary soon becomes lonely, yet he is reluctant to leave his stores of food behind in order to return home. Again the holy people assist him by spreading clouds upon the ground and wrapping his foods in them. This makes several small bundles which he can easily carry home. His journey is made upon a rainbow, and he is escorted by Talking God, Calling God, and Water Sprinkler.

After his return he teaches his younger brother the mysteries of the whirling logs so that his knowledge of Nightway will be complete, and he divides the vegetables and grains among his relatives for use as seeds. The story explains that before this heroic venture the Navajo people had no corn or pumpkins.³

An outstanding feature of these stories, which accounts for the tension and drama in them, is the existence of two kinds of worlds very different from each other. In the Nightway story there is the world of hunters and the game animals, and there is the world of holy people and the owners of the game. In the whirling logs story there is the world of the visionary's home and family, and there is the mysterious world of the holy people and the whirling lake. From the very beginning of both stories it is clear that the drama is focused upon the visionary because he has some knowledge of both worlds, while other Navajos apparently have little or no knowledge beyond their mundane world. As they unfold, the stories follow similar patterns. The visionary leaves the world of ordinary reality and travels to the other world, where he acquires knowledge. In the end he returns to relate this knowledge to those left behind. It seems that the holy people are free to visit the world of ordinary reality, but it is unusual and difficult for an earth surface person to visit the homes and world of the holy people. During the arduous journeys the visionary enters dangerous territories; he undergoes difficult

tests; he suffers imbalance and fear. Yet as a result of his journey he gains knowledge, courage, and balance. Through him knowledge of the other world comes to the Navajo people. This knowledge often reveals facts basic to the subsistence of the Navajo people. It shows that the elements of sustenance—game, corn, and other foods—are ultimately owned by or dependent upon the world of the holy people. The journey of the heroic visionary provides a means by which a complex multidimensional reality as established in the story is integrated and unified.

It is notable that the holy people keep the pictures which are the models for sand painting on *naskhá*, a cloth or spread, sometimes specified as a cloud. During the archetypal performance these cloths are spread upon the floor for use and later folded up. In revealing the pictures to *Bitahátini* the holy people explain, "We will not give you this picture; men are not as good as we; they might quarrel over the picture and tear it, and that would bring misfortune; the black cloud would not come again, and rain would not fall, the corn would not grow; but you may paint it on the ground with colors of the earth."⁴ In another place the visionary is told, "Truly they [Navajo people] cannot draw a picture on a cloud as we do; but they may imitate it, as best they can, on sand."⁵ Here too the existence of two kinds of worlds and of two kinds of peoples is emphasized.

This double imagery is interwoven dramatically throughout the sand-painting ritual. The hogan in which the sand painting is constructed is blessed at the outset of the ceremonial and set apart from the world outside. The ceremonial hogan is identified with the hogan in which the world was created and consequently with the very structure of the universe. The sand painting, done within this ritual enclosure and in the context of many other ritual acts, provides an identification with the events in the primal era when the heroic visionary lived. It replicates the picture revealed to him in the canyon where he learned Nightway and in the house of the holy people on the shore of the whirling lake. It also represents the whirling logs which he observed on the lake and upon which he rode with the holy people. The very shape and design of the sand painting echoes the shape of the hogan and the quarternary structure of the universe.

The design of the sand painting incorporates a complex dual imagery. On each arm of the log cross sit a male and a female *yé'ii*. By

the very nature of the cross the quarternary division of the world along the cardinal directions, east and west, north and south, is given representation. The paired Humpback *yé'ii* are set across from one another, as are Talking God and Calling God. The Navajo colors—white, blue, yellow, and black—are set across from their complements in the cornstalks. Contrasting colors are used as outline.

The rainbow guardian and the arc of plumed wands erected around the painting never completely enclose the sand painting. It is through this opening that the one for whom the ceremonial is performed enters and through which the *yé'ii* enter and leave. This is essential to the purpose of Navajo sand-painting rites and to the very meaning of the Navajo word for sand painting, *iikhááh*, which means "they enter and leave." This entryway, sometimes flanked by painted guardian figures, is aligned with the entryway of the ceremonial hogan, which faces east. This suggests that the Navajo recognize an essential communication and interdependence between the ritual world created in the ceremonial hogan and the ordinary world outside. This is precisely what the stories have shown in a different way.

Stylistically, something may be said about the way in which the double imagery is presented. In the story the log cross is contained within the lake, while in the sand-painting representation it projects out of the lake, reaching into the enclosed sphere. This seems to expand the significance of the log cross to more global dimensions and to suggest that it is not limited to the sphere of the lake. Still, the major holy people stand beyond it and control its movement with their staffs. The corn plants which appear in the four quadrants are rooted in the lake from which they are nourished, but they project into the areas of each quadrant, thus also forming a cross joined at the center in the lake. The details of the story correspond closely with the structure of the sand painting. The revelation of the whirling logs painting and the origin of agriculture are represented in the picture, one by the cross of logs, the other by the cross of corn. In the story the log cross on the lake was described as having stalks of corn affixed to it, which suggests an interrelationship between the whirling logs and the origin of agriculture. This interrelationship is maintained in the sand painting, for both crosses are based or rooted in the lake in the center.

The sand painting is, at one level, a visual reminder of the events in the story of a heroic adventurer who obtained knowledge of the Nightway ceremonial, who experienced the mysteries of the whirling logs, and who introduced agriculture to the Navajos. At another level the sand painting is a geometric projection of the essential pattern of order in the world.

The tension of the double imagery gains further complexity in the rite which takes place on the sand painting. The earth surface person walks upon the painting and sits amidst the holy people. This entry to the sand painting reenacts the visionary's journey in that it brings the two worlds together. A *yé'ii* enters the hogan and walks on the sand painting to administer the rite. The masked appearance is another instance of the coincidence or integration of the two worlds. The *yé'ii* offers to the one-sung-over the medicines that have been fed and applied to each of the holy people in the surrounding picture. Then with the aid of the moisture of the medicine on the hands of the *yé'ii*, the person being treated is ritually identified with each one of the holy people by being pressed at ritually designated spots on his or her body with sands from the corresponding parts of all of the surrounding holy people. This act of identification is described in a common prayer segment which goes:

His feet have become my feet, thereby I shall go through life.
 His legs have become my legs, thereby I shall go through life.
 His body has become my body, thereby I shall go through life.
 His mind has become my mind, thereby I shall go through life.
 His voice has become my voice, thereby I shall go through life.

In this way the person is identified with the very forces of the universe. He or she becomes one with the sources of life.

It is too little to say that for the person involved this identification must be a very significant event. The position on the logs identifies the person treated with the hero as he was escorted on the primordial ride around the lake. The suffering person too can experience this mystery. While it may well be beyond all description, his or her experience surely must be related to the position in the center of the sand painting which corresponds with the center of the world. The visual perspective of one sitting in the center of a sand painting is unique. From this vantage only portions of the painting may be seen

at any one time, and these only from the center outward and perhaps upward. This visual perspective introduces a depth and movement to the picture that cannot be enjoyed from any other place. The person being treated has a heightened experience of truly being at the center. And by being at the center of the sand painting, this map of cosmic dimensions, the person who perceives its cosmic design becomes the integrative element within it. In the person on the sand painting the complexly dual aspects of reality and their tension is resolved. To sit upon the sand painting and to be identified with its many elements is to experience the point common to all of them and therefore to see the unity and wholeness of the universe. The sand-painting event accomplishes a re-creation of the person and the universe. The world which may have seemed at odds with itself, experienced in the person as physical or mental suffering, is unified and reintegrated in the sand-painting rite, where it is acknowledged that the whole drama of the universe is repeated in the human being.

In the complex representation through the double imagery in the sand painting and the ritual acts, the person who is the subject in the ritual may achieve a unity transcending this duality, an integration of the many to the one. This opens to the person an experience of reality in which he or she may grasp the spiritual powers which are present in it and one with it.

In the sand-painting rite the person comes to experience the truth in the stories, which is that there are not two worlds, but one world composed of parts which are complexly interrelated and interdependent. Order and disorder (*hózhó* and *hóchó* in Navajo) are interdependent, as are health and sickness, life and death, spiritual and material.

Once this truth is experienced, the sand painting can no longer serve as a map. The person being treated has found his or her way from within the sand painting; as he or she has become a part of it, it has disappeared by becoming a part of him or her. With the experience of the unity of the world the sand painting, as a depiction of the order of the world, cannot exist. So the destruction of the sand painting that always occurs during its use corresponds with the dissolution of the double imagery it presents. When a person arises and leaves the sand painting, his or her experience of unity is con-

firmed in a way by the destroyed sand painting. The many colors have dissolved into one as the sands and the renewed Navajo person return to the world.

NOTES

1. For publication of the Whirling Logs sand painting see Washington Matthews, *The Night Chant, a Navajo Ceremony* (New York: American Museum of Natural History, Memoirs vol. 6, 1902), plate VI; James Stevenson, *Ceremonial of Hasjelti Dailjis and Mythical Sand Painting of the Navajo Indians* (Washington: Bureau of American Ethnology 8th Annual Report, 1891), Plate CXXI; Ruth Underhill, *The Navajos* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956), p. 80; and Sam D. Gill, *Songs of Life: An Introduction to Navajo Religious Culture* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1979), Plates XXVa-XXXI.
2. Matthews, *Night Chant*, pp. 183-84.
3. *Night Chant*, pp. 171-97.
4. *Night Chant*, p. 165.
5. *Night Chant*, pp. 182-83.